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ABSTRACT

Undergraduate course withdrawal at the University of Washington has risen from 3.5 percent in fall 1964 to 7 percent in spring 1973. In an attempt to understand the dynamics of withdrawal, the Faculty Council on Academic Standards arranged a survey of students dropping classes in the spring quarter of 1973. It was found that, typically, students were motivated to withdraw by too heavy a course load, which, however, was not acted on until the last two weeks of the quarter. Juniors withdrew more often than other groups. Although, in general, students remained in class long after they were aware of a problem, less than half took any steps to solve it before dropping a course. Numerous graphs illustrate withdrawal trends according to week of withdrawal, class standing, reason for course selection, reason given for withdrawal, and lag between problem onset and withdrawal time. (Author/MSE)

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Educational Assessment Center

University of Washington

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# Why Do UW Students Withdraw from Classes?

C. E. Lunneborg P. W. Lunneborg

V. de Wolf

Students withdrawing from classes at UW spring 1973 were surveyed to determine the dynamics of the withdrawal process. They were motivated typically by too heavy a course load, which, however, was not acted upon until the last two weeks of the quarter. Juniors withdrew more often than other student groups. Although typically students remained in class long after they were aware of a problem, less than half took any steps to solve it before dropping.

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## Why Do UW Students Withdraw from Classes?

A typical student response to this question was: "The whole problem is 15 credits. I would have gotten a B in the course (dropped), but without what I feel is adequate mastery. For a 3-credit course it demanded time and meditation I did not have time to put in with 13 other credits, a job, and research commitments. This problem has bothered me before. I cannot afford ($$$) to take less than 15 hours and yet I don't have time to do the work required." On the other hand, a typical faculty response would be: "A large number of course withdrawals late in the quarter, particularly in the last week of instruction, can only be interpreted as an attempt on the part of students to avoid evaluation and is the primary contributor to the cheapening of the GPA." Whether the faculty or students are correct, the fact is that the University has a high withdrawal rate both relative to what it was ten years ago and to what it is at comparable institutions. Withdrawals (PWs, EWs) have increased from 3.5% of the undergraduate grades awarded in fall 1964 to 7% in spring 1973.

In an attempt to understand the dynamics of the withdrawal process the Faculty Council on Academic Standards arranged to have the Office of Institutional Educational Research survey students dropping classes during spring 1973. Some preliminary results of the survey completed by 3,351 students have already been reported (IER, 1973). The present report will extend these analyses. Although these 3,351 cases represent only 55% of the total number of course withdrawals (6,062), the loss of cases was principally due to inconsistency in the offering of the survey by the Registrar's Office rather than selective student participation, hence these results are considered essentially unbiased.

### Who withdraws and when?

As can be seen from Figure 1 percentage figures to the right, half of the withdrawals occurred in the last two weeks of the quarter. Although there was some tendency for seniors and graduate students to drop courses sooner than lower classmen, fully one-third of the graduate course withdrawals were in the last two weeks. Although class standing would thus appear not to influence time of withdrawing from courses, it was related to frequency of withdrawal. As Figure 2 illustrates the amount of withdrawal was greatest in the junior class and least among graduate students even though these two groups are of comparable size.

Figure 3 illustrates that reasons for enrolling in courses were not strongly related to when courses were dropped. As can be seen the major reasons for dropped courses being selected in the first place were that they were in the student's major or were simply "interesting." Yet no reason stands out as motivating disproportionate withdrawal at any particular point in time. As might be expected, seniors tended to drop "major" courses rather than "distribution" courses and the reverse was true for freshmen.

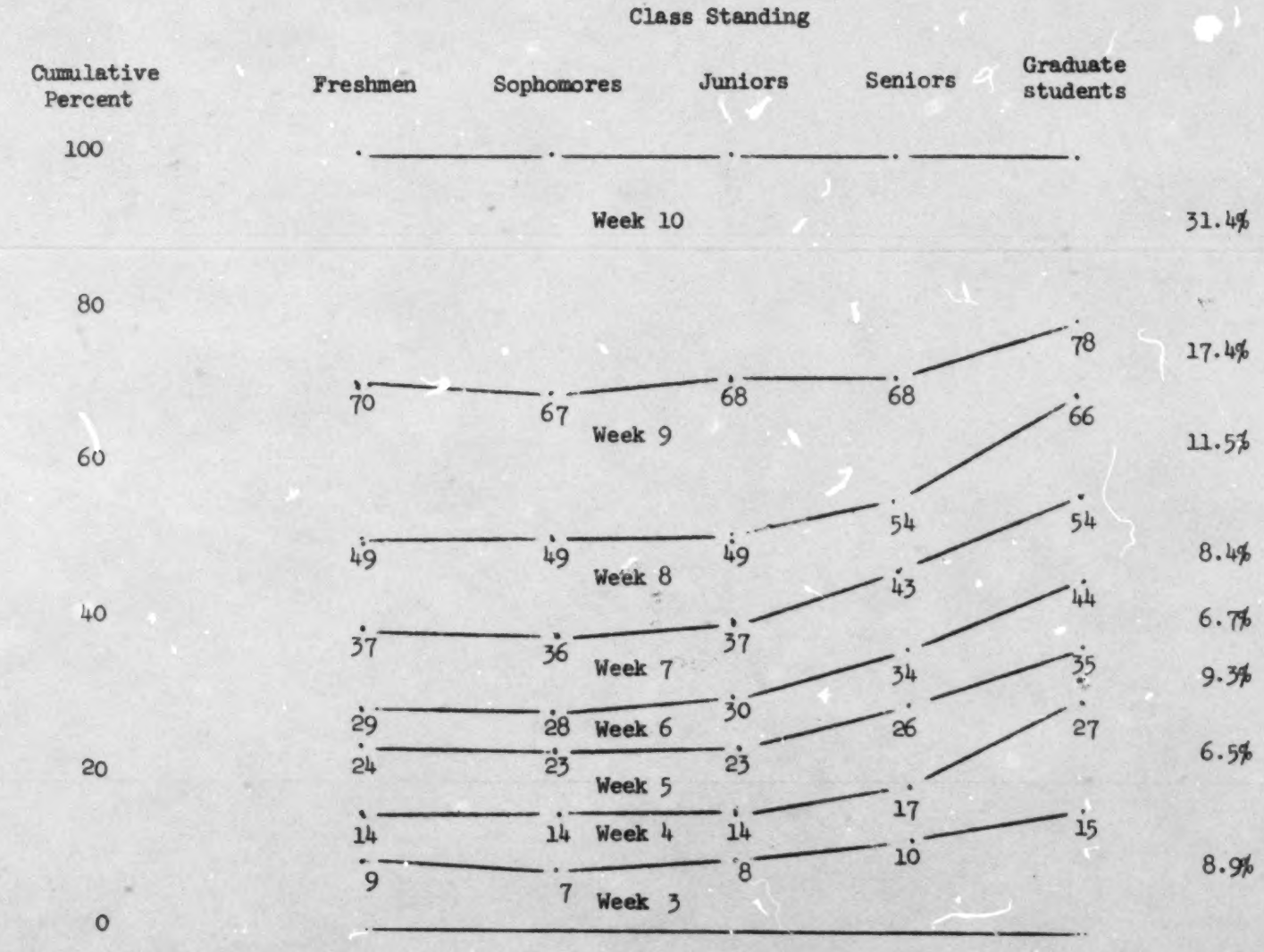


Figure 1

Class Standing and Week of Withdrawal

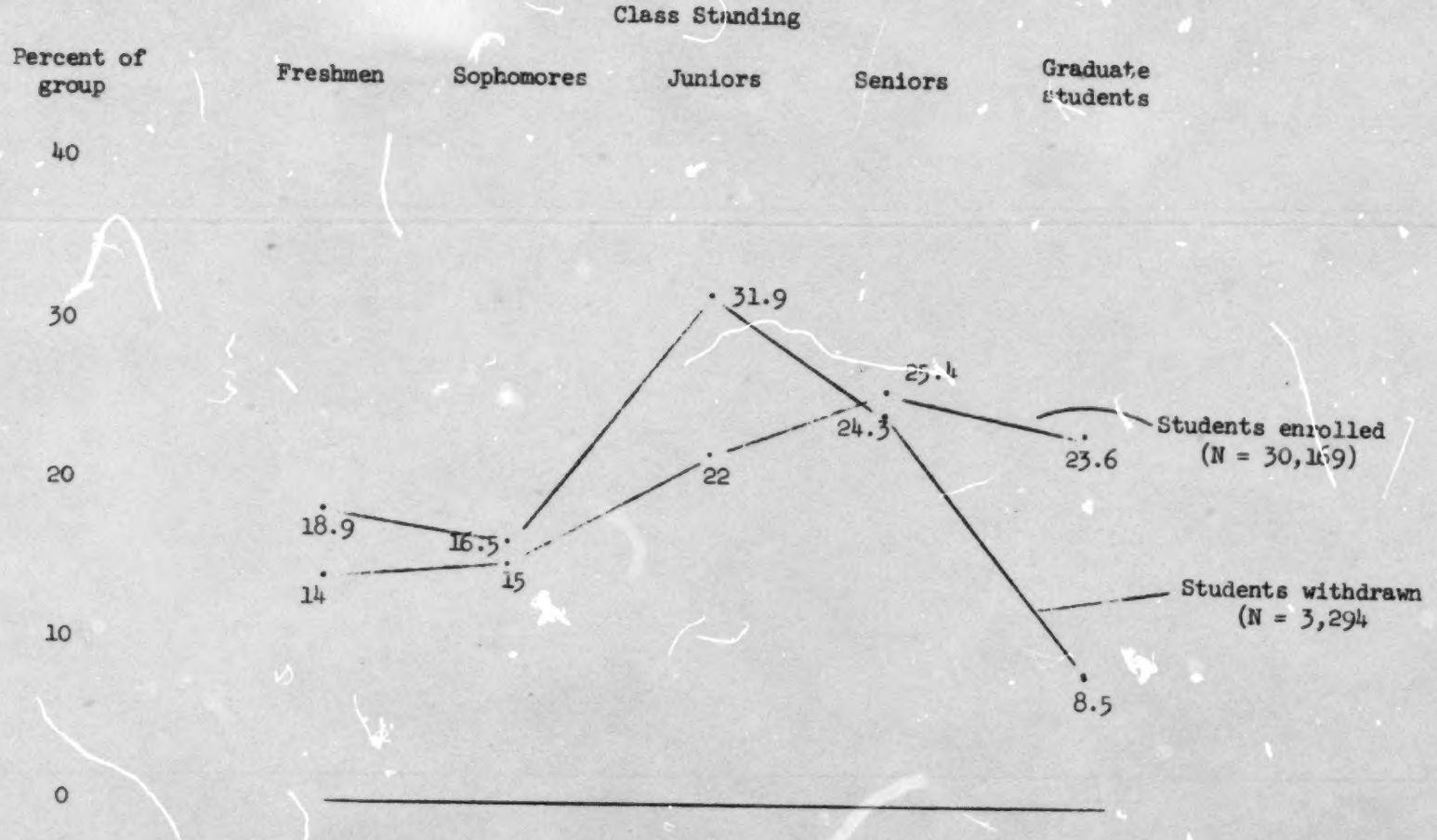


Figure 2

Class Standing and Withdrawal Rates

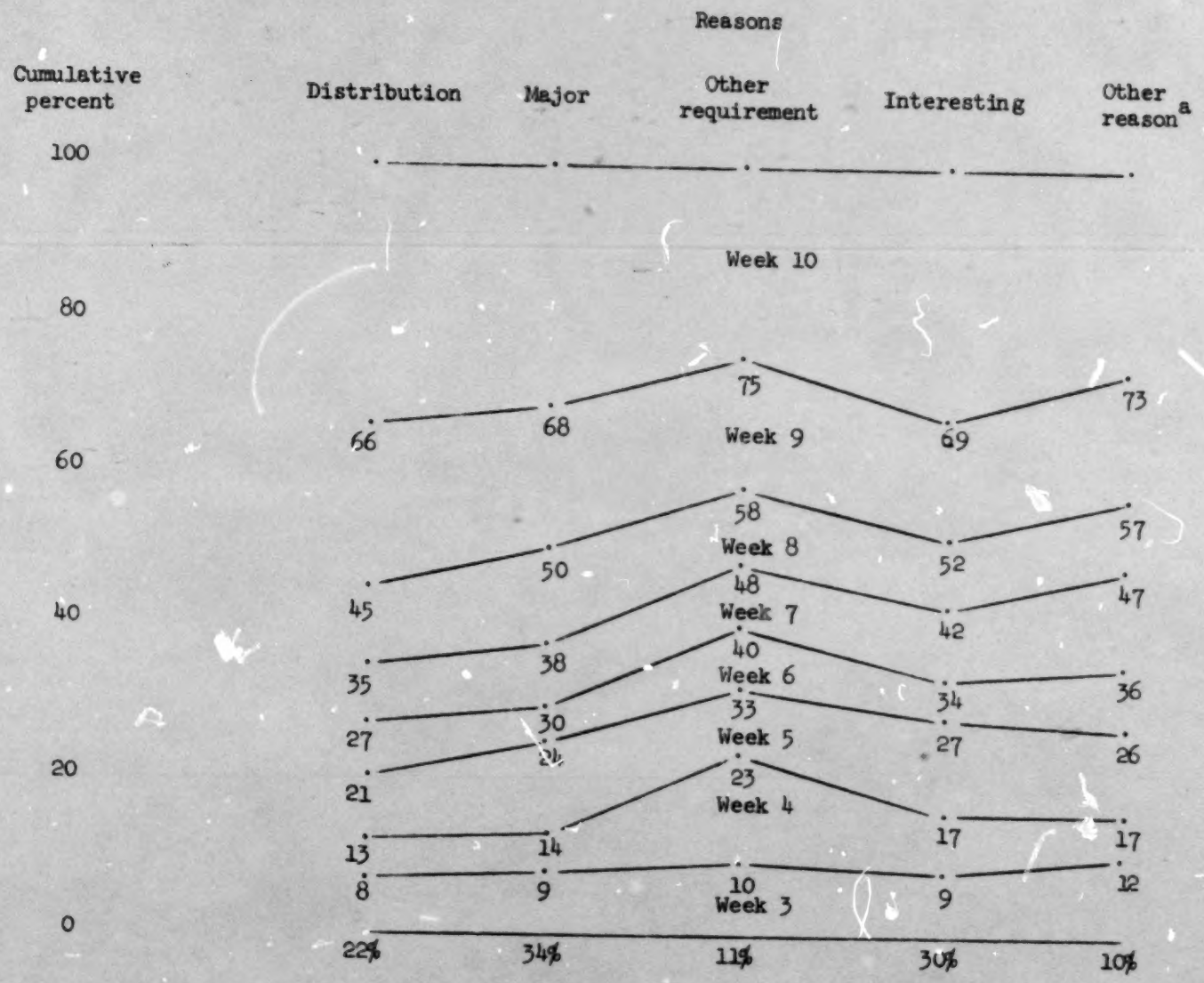


Figure 3

Reason for Course Selection and Week of Withdrawal

[a]Some students checked more than one reason hence figures exceed 100%.

Why do they withdraw?

Students most frequently say that the "most important" reason for dropping a course is that they had taken "too heavy a load." Second most important, as given in the percentage figures to the right in Figure 4, was that the course had conflicted "with job or other activities." Student-centered "most important reasons" (personal, conflict, load and "disappointed with probable grade") accounted for 69% overall of withdrawals. Institution or system-centered reasons, on the other hand, were given by 31% as most important (disappointed with the system, instructor, or class plus registration error).

Figure 4 data are based on the 2107 withdrawals for which a most important reason was indicated. Following presentations of reasons for withdrawal, in contrast, are based on students checking one or more reasons as important. Because approximately 2-1/4 reasons were given per withdrawal, percentages across reasons in subsequent figures and tables will not sum to 100.

Table 1 shows that the four most frequently checked reasons for withdrawing were also the top four "most important" in Figure 4. Figure 5, a graphic representation of Table 1 data, shows that too heavy course load and conflict with other activities peaked at midterm as reasons for dropping classes. Disappointment with probable grade increased markedly over the quarter, a trend unique among reasons except for the rather similar institution-centered reason of disappointment with grading system. On the survey this appeared as "Grading (unfair, too low, uncertain about where I stood, etc.)." Despite the increased usage of this last reason it remained the least frequently checked throughout the quarter.

Did class standing have anything to do with the reasons given for withdrawal? Figure 6 says "yes," with the three institution-centered reasons (disappointment with class, instructor and grading system) declining noticeably in frequency as class standing rose. Disappointment with probable grade also decreased dramatically from the freshman group to graduate students, while conflicts with other activities became progressively more important over the undergraduate years. The one enduring problem which students appear not to learn how to avoid is taking too heavy a course load.

Do reasons for dropping a class interact with reasons for selecting a class? While most reasons for withdrawal were constant across the four reasons for selecting classes (for example, personal reasons varied from 33% to 39%), disappointment with class was indicated more frequently for courses chosen to meet distribution requirements or because they sounded interesting (Figure 7). Similarly, disappointment with probable grade was noticeably less important as a reason for withdrawing if the class was taken because it seemed interesting. It thus appears that students withdraw from disappointing classes when other classes can be substituted (to meet distribution requirements or as electives) and that students are less concerned with grades in nonrequired courses.

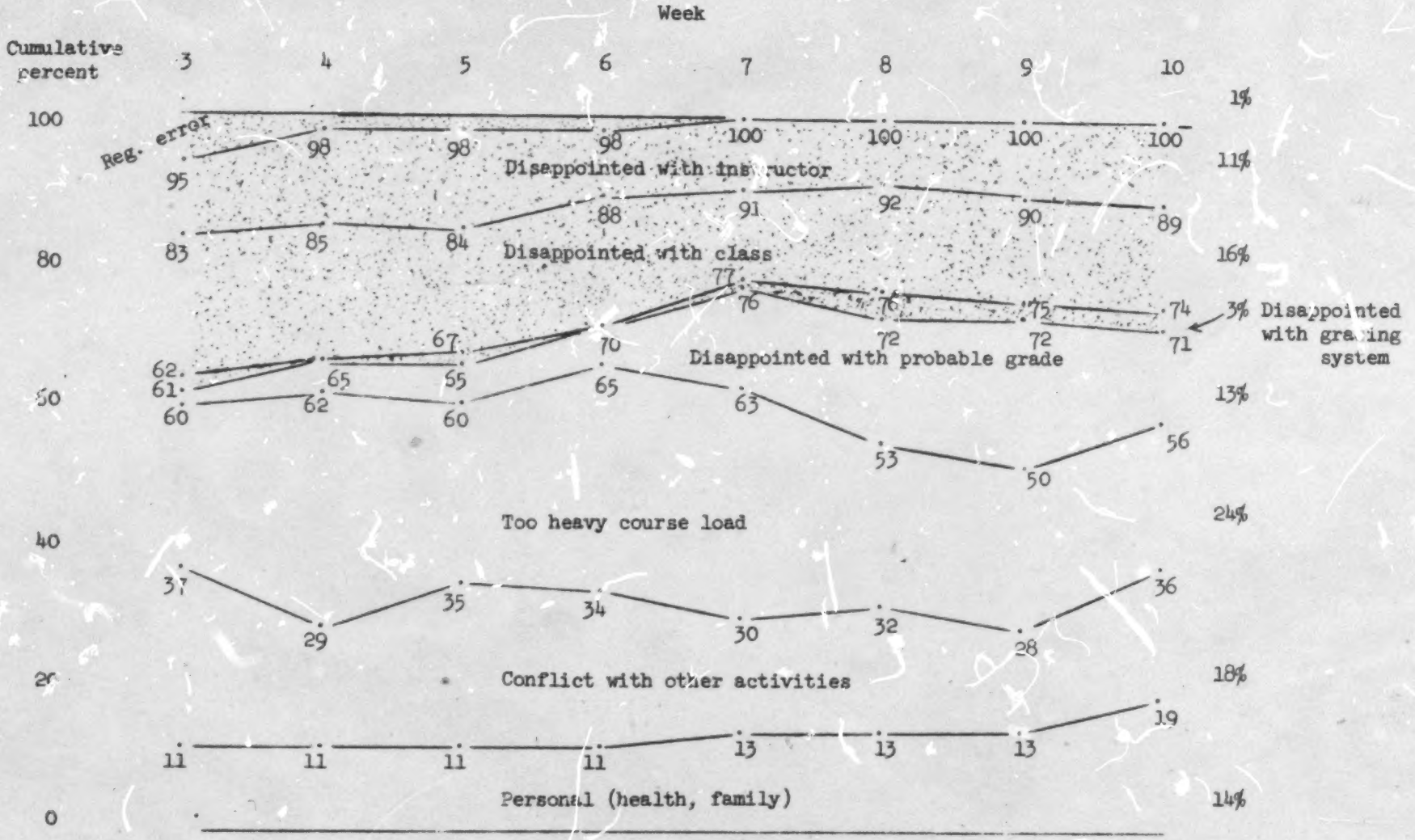


Figure 4

Cumulative Percentage Distribution of Most Important Withdrawal Reasons

Table 1

Reasons for Withdrawal by Week[a]

| Week | Too heavy course load | | Conflict with other activities | | Personal (health, family) | | Disapp. in class | | Disapp. in probable grade | | Disapr. in instructor | | Disapp. in grading system | | N |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | N | % | N | % | N | % | N | % | N | % | N | % | N | % | |
| 3 | 112 | (38.1) | 118 | (40.1) | 92 | (31.3) | 86 | (29.3) | 36 | (12.2) | 69 | (23.5) | 23 | (7.8) | 294 |
| 4 | 100 | (45.9) | 86 | (39.4) | 74 | (33.9) | 86 | (39.4) | 43 | (19.7) | 61 | (28.0) | 25 | (11.5) | 218 |
| 5 | 149 | (47.8) | 145 | (46.5) | 107 | (34.3) | 114 | (36.5) | 70 | (22.4) | 91 | (29.2) | 41 | (13.1) | 312 |
| 6 | 117 | (52.0) | 95 | (42.2) | 77 | (34.2) | 81 | (36.0) | 59 | (26.2) | 56 | (24.9) | 31 | (13.8) | 225 |
| 7 | 123 | (43.6) | 105 | (37.2) | 79 | (28.0) | 93 | (33.0) | 78 | (27.7) | 71 | (25.2) | 41 | (14.5) | 282 |
| 8 | 147 | (38.3) | 133 | (34.6) | 114 | (29.7) | 137 | (35.7) | 131 | (34.1) | 101 | (26.3) | 69 | (18.0) | 384 |
| 9 | 234 | (40.1) | 233 | (40.0) | 199 | (34.1) | 223 | (38.3) | 262 | (44.9) | 187 | (32.1) | 126 | (21.6) | 583 |
| 10 | 397 | (37.7) | 379 | (36.0) | 431 | (40.9) | 330 | (31.3) | 366 | (34.7) | 283 | (26.9) | 179 | (17.0) | 1054 |
| | 1379 | (41.1) | 1294 | (38.6) | 1173 | (35.0) | 1150 | (34.3) | 1045 | (31.2) | 919 | (27.4) | 555 | (16.0) | |
| | | | | | | | | | | | Total reasons | | 7521 | | |
| | | | | | | | | | | | Total students | | | | 3352 |

$p < .0003$

[a]26 "registration errors" not included. Table entries are frequencies and percentages of students checking each reason each week. Approx 2-1/4 reasons given per student.

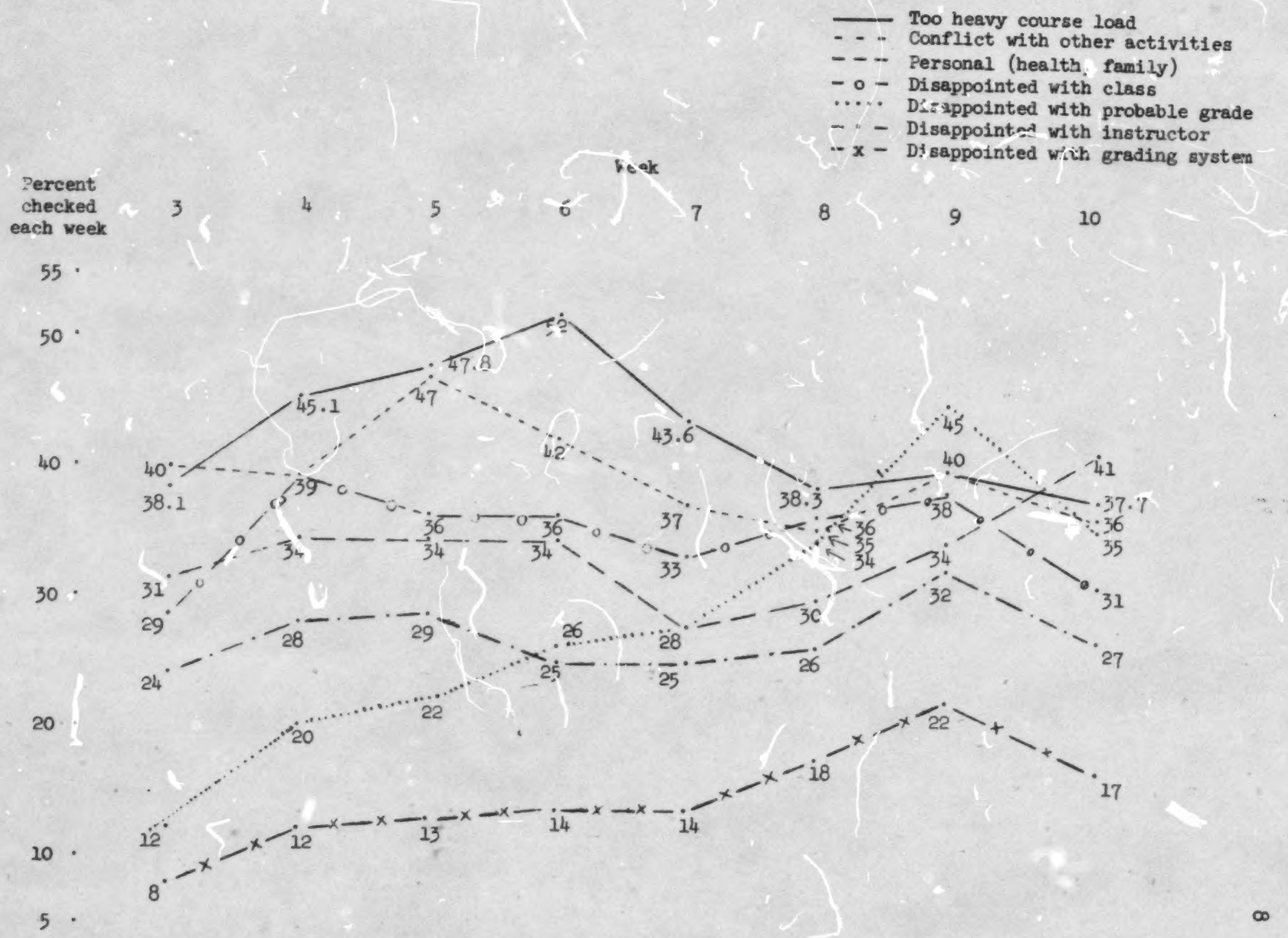


Figure 5

Percentages of Reasons for Withdrawal by Week

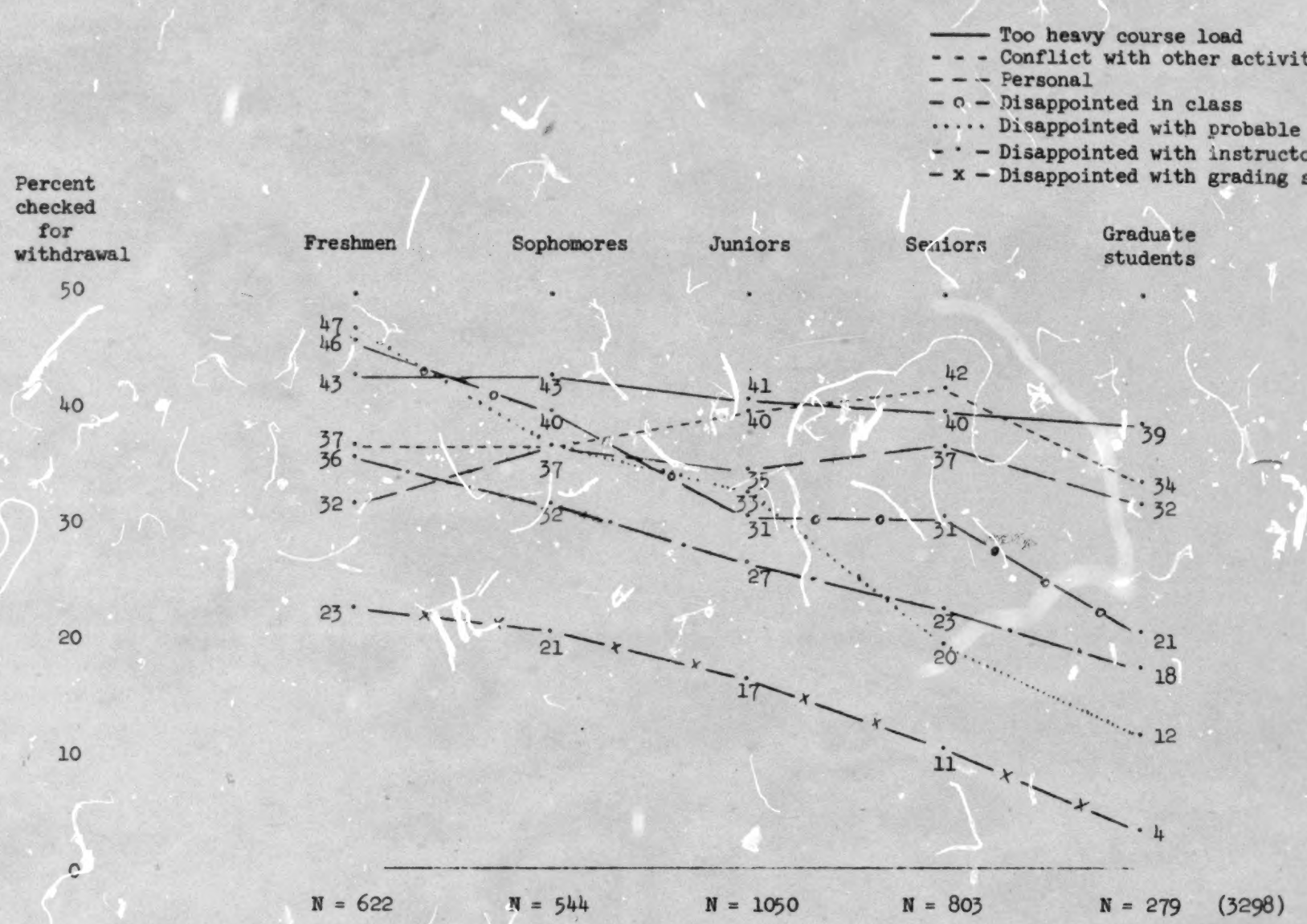


Figure 6

Class Standing vs. Withdrawal

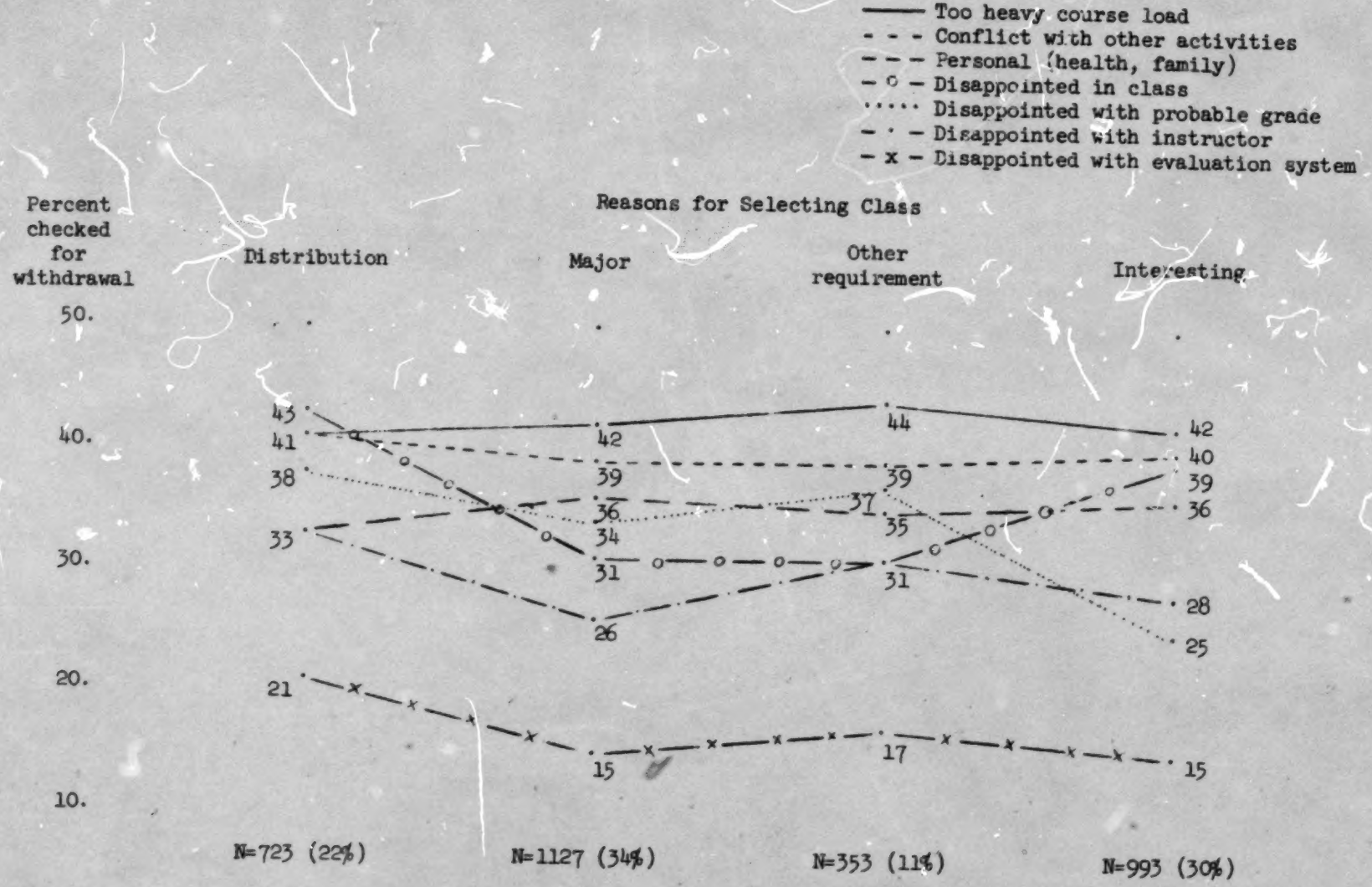


Figure 7

Reasons for Selection vs. Withdrawal

The survey asked "What other steps besides withdrawal did you consider or take to solve the problem?" Overall 46% of withdrawals were preceded by some "other steps." Whether steps were taken was independent of the reason given for dropping the course except that nearly 60% of those who were disappointed with their probable grade had tried to solve the problem some other way before finally withdrawing. Likewise whether steps were taken was independent of reason for selecting the course except that only 41% of withdrawals from "interesting" classes were accompanied by some previous attempt to solve the problem.

It was possible to examine the amount of time that elapsed between when a course became a problem to a student and when he/she dropped. These "lag" data are given in Figure 8. There was a tendency for a longer lag to be associated with institution-centered reasons for dropping--disappointment with instructor or class--and for a shorter lag to be associated with student-centered reasons for dropping, i.e., because of a heavy course load or conflict with other activities.

Finally, data were available on the question of whether late withdrawals result from students putting off the official act of withdrawal. In this sample 17% overall of course withdrawals were not effected until at least three weeks after the student had ceased attending the class. This delay in completing withdrawal was independent of the reason for withdrawal except for the small percentage (9%) of delayers among those who were withdrawing because of probable grade.

Discussion

If there is such a thing as a typical course withdrawal, it is accomplished by a junior, from a major course, in the face of too heavy a course load, at the end of the term. Although there is only a fifty-fifty chance the student will have considered an alternative to dropping, he/she will have remained registered in the course three to four weeks after sensing difficulty and will continue attending class to within a week of formally dropping.

What implications does such a picture have for withdrawal policy? What, for example, would be the impact of restricting course withdrawal to the early weeks of the term? The fact that the typical student delays dropping a course (49% waiting four or more weeks) suggests that withdrawal decisions could be completed earlier in the term. Further, as withdrawals late in the quarter include many for the purpose of avoiding a disappointing grade, this reason for withdrawal would be drastically reduced.

The current withdrawal policy for faculty states that "If the student's work in a course is not satisfactory at the time of withdrawal, grade of EW." Yet a survey of faculty attitudes towards awarding FWs and EWs (IER, 1971) found only 19% of faculty following the Faculty Handbook. The vast majority of faculty were described as very lenient with many never having given an EW and in practice giving FWs at any time regardless of

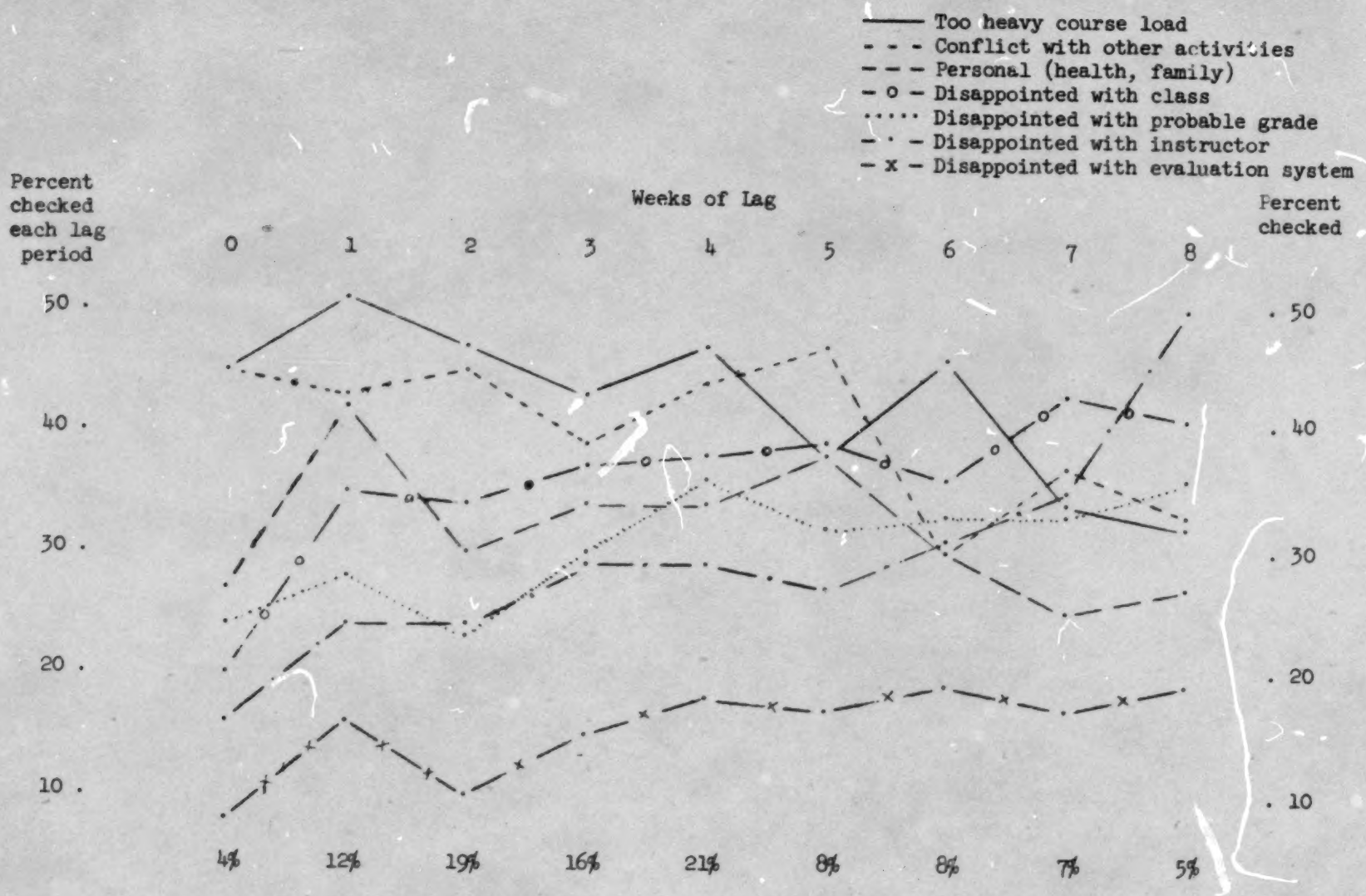


Figure 8

Reasons for Withdrawal Associated with Lag between Problem Onset and Withdrawal

student performance. This policy is borne out by the data for spring 1975 where only 1.2% of withdrawals were EWs. Thus if withdrawal were restricted to the first weeks of the term possible faculty misuse of PW under the present policy would be precluded.

Seven percent withdrawal is only one facet of this picture. As Dickinson (1973) pointed out withdrawers were carrying a median credit load of 15.2 hours compared to 14.3 for the whole university. He also found that 61% of withdrawers had dropped courses previously. What this means to the typical student is that it is going to take him fully one quarter (13 credits) more to graduate (7% withdrawal from 180 hours) and an additional quarter's tuition. What this means for the University is that 7% of instructional costs are lost.

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